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Committee on Conferences
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Agenda item 3 (a)
Documentation and publication-related matters: distribution of documentation

Distribution of documentation

Note by the Secretariat

I. Introduction

1. The timely distribution of documents is a major concern for many intergovernmental organs and it is a subject of repeated requests of the General Assembly. Most recently, in resolution 54/248 C, the Assembly reiterated its request to the Secretary-General to ensure that documentation is available in accordance with the six-week rule for the distribution of documents simultaneously in the six official languages of the General Assembly.

2. In the same resolution, the General Assembly urged intergovernmental bodies, when feasible, to become more actively involved in rationalizing their meeting schedules in order to ensure the timely distribution of all related documentation, and requested the Secretary-General to submit proposals based on the reviews, through the Committee on Conferences, to the General Assembly at its fifty-fifth session.

3. The present interim report, submitted in response to that request, contains draft proposals aimed at improving the timely issuance of pre-session documentation. These proposals could be the subject of further considerations and future recommendations. Some of the proposals address issues that may require action on the part of the intergovernmental bodies while some others can be implemented by the Secretariat.

II. Draft proposals requiring action by the Secretariat

A. Planning meeting

4. According to the current practice, servicing secretariats and bureaux of the intergovernmental bodies are actively involved, albeit to varying degrees, in the reviews of the preparation and availability of their pre-session documentation before and during their sessions. This is the case when, well in advance of their sessions, the status of documentation and the programme of work documents are prepared. Series of ad hoc consultations with the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services also take place to coordinate the submission of documents. Periodically, meetings are held with the participation of conference services and focal points for documentation of the author departments in order to plan and review the timing and other formal requirements of document submission. The function of departmental focal points was created to better coordinate all document submissions from each author department. The leading role is assigned to the documentation programming and

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monitoring units at major duty stations. In these units and in conference services, the more advanced utilization of electronic databases makes the programming and monitoring more timely and transparent.

Draft proposal 1

Three months prior to the opening of the session, a planning meeting or an equivalent exchange of communications should be held between the servicing secretariat and the substantive department, on the one hand, and representatives of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, on the other, to review documentation forecasts, bearing in mind the 10-week rule for document submission and the requirement to issue a document on the status of documentation.

B. Documentation forecast

5. Pre-session documentation forecasts are intended to enable conference services to plan the allocation of resources according to changing demands. More often than not, forecasts are inaccurate and unreliable. This is partly due to the insufficient information substantive departments are providing while still in the drafting stages of their documents.

Draft proposal 2

Substantive departments should prepare forecasts of the volume of documentation under preparation and be required, to the extent possible, to keep the length of their submissions within the limits of their original forecast. Such forecasts should be presented to the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services and to the servicing secretariats in conjunction with the planning meeting.

III. Draft proposals requiring action by intergovernmental organs

A. Processing late submissions

6. Since late submission is the main cause of the low rate of compliance with the six-week rule for the issuance of documentation, one very important subject of the ongoing dialogue between the author departments, documentation programming and monitoring units and conference services is the timely submission of documents. It was noted by the Committee in its report for 1999[1] that, when all the documents are issued by the opening of the session, an organ is three times more likely to have a high utilization factor of conference services than to have one below the benchmark rating.

Draft proposal 3

In order to minimize the negative impact of late submissions by one intergovernmental organ on the timely issuance of documents for other organs, late submissions could be processed by rescheduling the processing of other documents submitted by the same department for consideration in the same body.

B. Periodicity of reporting cycles

7. Reporting cycles of intergovernmental bodies that end too close to the opening of the session of the General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council by definition make timely submission impossible and result in late issuance. Although the General Assembly requested subsidiary organs to re-evaluate their reporting cycles with a view to completing annual work programmes prior to the start of the regular sessions of the Assembly, in some cases, this is not possible or practical.

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 32* (A/54/32), para. 91.

Draft proposal 4

Intergovernmental organs should review their reporting cycles and periodicity may be introduced in the reporting in the form of requesting quarterly or biannual reports instead of annual ones.

C. Submission of addenda to update information

8. In a number of cases, author departments delay submissions in order to include the most up-to-date information in their reports. By doing so, they double the negative effect of such submissions: they are not only late but usually over the page limit.

Draft proposal 5

Intergovernmental organs may wish to authorize substantive departments to prepare reports and submit them for processing in accordance with the 10-week rule even if all the relevant information is not available and, if it is necessary to include additional information, subsequently submit addenda to the parent document.

D. Adjusting the programme of work

9. Recurrence of late submission of documents under the same item should warrant a closer examination of the case. If all the above efforts fail to avert a situation whereby a document is submitted late for processing, it might be possible in the case of sessions more than just several weeks long, to adjust the programme of work so that items at the top of the agenda for which documentation was submitted late could be rescheduled for consideration later during the session or even postponed to a resumed session or to the following session.

Draft proposal 6

Servicing secretariats and bureaux of intergovernmental bodies, in preparation for their sessions, while reviewing the status of documentation may wish to decide, in cases of recurrent late submissions, to adjust the proposed programme of work and, as appropriate, reorder agenda items and delay or postpone consideration of items or documents.

IV. Recommendation

10. **The above draft proposals should serve as a basis for the formulation of more elaborate and refined recommendations that, once acted upon, could help intergovernmental bodies in rationalizing meeting schedules in such a way as to enable conference services to process documents and distribute them in a timely manner for their scheduled consideration.**